

While we in the United States face many difficulties related to the economy and the budget, a raging conflict in Syria has once again brought our attention to the harsh realities of international instability.

Inspired by upheavals that engulfed the Middle East from Tunisia to Libya to Egypt, the Syrian uprising began with anti-government protests on March 15, 2011. So many horrific scenarios have unfolded over the past year that it is difficult to keep track of the atrocities.

Ghiyath Matar, a young Syrian man and a father-to-be, worked as a tailor in the ancient biblical city of Damascus. He lived a quiet life, of which we know little, but as demonstrations began in his country for an expansion of political and civil rights, Ghiyath joined in. He earned the nickname "Little Gandhi" for his courageous approach to exercising his right to petition the government. He did not act in violence he did not seek revenge. He walked to the front of the line and simply handed roses and water to Syrian troops who had been sent to shoot demonstrators. As passionate a place as the Middle East is, and as many scores as there are to be settled there, he chose to be a face of peace.

One month before he was to celebrate his 25th birthday, Ghiyath was dead. His body was delivered to his parents' home, having endured brutal and merciless torture. In what has become a trademark of the regime, the senseless hostility directed toward innocent civilians, including young children, continues to shock the world's conscience. The humanitarian dimension of the Syrian conflict, which has claimed more than 18,000 lives, is staggering.

Syria is ruled by a man named Bashar Assad. Raised in wealth and privilege, educated in the West and dressed in the finest clothes that money can buy, Bashar Assad took full advantage of the many benefits of western civil society. He succeeded his father, who had ruled Syria as a strong-armed dictator for three decades. The younger barbaric Assad has now unleashed a torrent of indiscriminate violence upon his own people.

As the conflict has intensified, numerous rebel groups have formed. It is not clear who they are. Two weeks ago rebel forces were able to penetrate deeply into Assad's power structure, killing several of his top security advisers. Some observers speculated that this was a turning point for the regime. Indeed it appears that the days of the Assad regime's rule in Syria are numbered, and his fall appears inevitable to me.

While President Obama recently agreed to provide material support to rebels fighting the brutal Assad regime, the United States will not directly engage in the conflict in Syria. However we cannot ignore the situation, which presents an ongoing threat to international stability. This threat has numerous dimensions, encompassing the security and disposition of Syria's chemical weapons, the role of Syria as a proxy for Iran in the Mediterranean, as well as its role as a client of Russia, which has consistently fueled the conflict by strengthening the Syrian regime's military capabilities.

What comes next remains an open question with profound regional and international implications. Implications for Israel, which borders Syria from the Golan Heights, and continues in a strained peace with Syria that echoes the drama of the 1967 war. Implications for the stability of neighboring Lebanon, which has struggled to overcome overbearing Syrian influence. Implications for its northern neighbor and NATO member Turkey.

In the wake of a regime change in Syria, it is particularly incumbent upon the nations closest to the conflict, such as Turkey and Members of the Arab League, to ensure the security of weapons of mass destruction and some semblance of order. Maybe Syria can emerge from decades of repression without lapsing into utter chaos.

The road ahead is unclear. The Syrian people deserve, at the very least, a stable society, respect for human rights, and a government that works earnestly to secure genuine justice within its borders. That would be a lasting tribute to Ghiyath Matar.